

*National Park Service*  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Kenai Fjords National Park  
Alaska



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## Finding of No Significant Impact

### Exit Glacier Area Plan and General Management Plan Amendment

October 2004

Recommended: \_\_\_\_\_  
Superintendent, Kenai Fjords National Park Date

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Director, Alaska Date

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)**  
**Exit Glacier Area Plan**  
**and General Management Plan Amendment**  
**Kenai Fjords National Park**  
**October 2004**

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates management plan alternatives for the Exit Glacier area of Kenai Fjords National Park (KEFJ), near Seward, Alaska. The purpose of the *Exit Glacier Area Plan* is to define a direction for resource preservation and visitor use in the Exit Glacier area of Kenai Fjords National Park to preserve the special experience at this unique locale, add additional visitor opportunities such as education and hiking, and manage user conflict. This plan will provide a foundation for future management and describe desired natural and cultural resource conditions and visitor experiences that are to be achieved and maintained in the Exit Glacier area over the next 15 to 20 years.

The NPS has decided to implement a modified preferred alternative with mitigation measures (see Attachment A for details).

Attachment B provides details about public comments received on the EA, NPS response to substantive comments, and clarifications, modification, or additional information added to the EA.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

The EA evaluated four alternatives: a no-action alternative, the preferred alternative, alternative A, and alternative B.

The **no-action alternative** provides a baseline for evaluating the changes and impacts of the three action alternatives. Under this alternative, park managers would continue to manage the park as it has in the past, relying on existing plans and policies. No new construction or major changes would occur, except for already approved developments. Existing park facilities would be operated and maintained as they have in the past. No visitor carrying capacity or other new visitor management initiatives would be implemented.

The **preferred alternative** would make changes to address impacts resulting from increased levels of visitor use. The Exit Glacier area would be zoned to ensure that resources are protected and that opportunities are provided for a range of visitor experiences. The focus of this alternative would be to enhance the opportunities to view Exit Glacier, which is the main attraction of the area, and to provide for additional non-motorized recreational opportunities. The preferred alternative also is considered the **environmentally preferred alternative**.

To address carrying capacity, a long-term monitoring program would be established to preserve and protect natural and cultural resources and the visitor experience. Resource and visitor experience indicators and standards would be developed in a subsequent planning process to ensure that resources are protected and that opportunities are provided for visitor enjoyment. If monitoring

determines that conditions are deteriorating, appropriate management actions would be taken to ensure that resources and visitors' opportunities for positive recreational experiences would not be degraded or lost.

**Alternative A** would focus on improving interpretation, education, and non-motorized recreation, and would rely more on increased staffing and program development than on physical development to do so. The goal of this concept is to transform Exit Glacier from a "photo-op" of the glacier to an education experience. Like the preferred alternative, park managers would apply management zones to manage visitor use and would address carrying capacity through a long-term monitoring program.

**Alternative B** would promote increasing the infrastructure of the Exit Glacier area to accommodate a greater number of visitors and recreational activities year-round. Visitor demand and economic feasibility would determine if the key actions would be implemented. Like the preferred alternative, park managers would apply management zones to manage visitor use and would address carrying capacity through a long-term monitoring program.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The Exit Glacier Area Plan was originally initiated as an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The NPS determined, however, that an Environmental Assessment (EA) would suffice for the plan. Preliminary analysis of the alternatives showed that there was no potential for significant impacts to the park resources and values. Scoping conducted for the draft EIS indicated less controversy than anticipated when the project was initiated. Furthermore, changes to the proposal, specifically, dropping the proposed alternative transportation system (shuttle bus), reduced the scope of this planning effort. For these reasons, the NPS determined that the proposal would not constitute a major federal action requiring an EIS.

The scoping process for this project was initiated on July 27, 2001, when the *Federal Register* published a Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS. Subsequent scoping efforts included presentations to local groups, distribution of four newsletters (including one describing preliminary alternatives), response forms soliciting public input, a park web site with project information (<http://www.nps.gov/kefj/home.htm>), open interdisciplinary team meetings which the public could attend to listen to the planning process, and several public meetings and meetings with local groups. A mailing list of over 400 names was compiled and used for this planning process; all newsletters also were placed on the web site.

The EA was available for a 30-day public review and comment period from May 3 to June 1, 2004. Printed copies of the document were sent to 62 individuals and/or agencies who expressed interest or participated in the process. Flyers notifying the public of the document's availability were sent to 380 individuals and organizations. A notice announcing the availability of the plan and soliciting public comments appeared in the Seward Phoenix Log on April 29, 2004. Additionally, the EA was also posted on the KEFJ website. Also during the review period, on May 26, 2004, a public meeting was held in Seward. Twenty three individuals attended.

The NPS received a total of 33 comment letters or emails about the EA. One comment letter was received from a government agency, the State of Alaska. The remaining letters were from non-government organizations and individuals.

The commenters raised concerns about the following topics, which are addressed in more detail in Attachment B.

- Winter Activities
- Definition of “Traditional Activities”
- Resource Impacts
- Management Zones
- Other

## **DECISION**

The NPS decision is to select a modified preferred alternative, along with mitigating measures, for the Exit Glacier area of Kenai Fjords National Park. The modified preferred alternative calls for implementing the original preferred alternative during the summer season as described in the May 2004 *Exit Glacier Area Plan EA*. However, during the winter season, the original preferred alternative will be implemented only for the Visitor Facilities and Pedestrian zones as described in the EA; the NPS will not take the actions related to winter management within the remainder of the study area. See Attachment A for a complete description of this modified preferred alternative.

### **Rationale for the Decision**

The modified preferred alternative will meet the purpose and need for action in the following ways:

1. *Define a direction for resource preservation and visitor use in the Exit Glacier area* – this will be accomplished in all zones (except the Natural Zone) by establishing a long-term monitoring plan for natural and social indicators, setting standards for the indicators, and taking management action when standards are deteriorating or have been violated.
2. *Preserve the special experience of easily approaching a glacier on foot* – this alternative will improve the Overlook Loop Trail, which many visitors hike to view the glacier, to accommodate increasing visitation; provide access to the face of the glacier as it retreats; include a viewing platform with a spotting scope for physically challenged visitors to view the glacier; provide a groomed path to the glacier in the winter for non-motorized recreation.
3. *Add additional visitor opportunities* – a bike path and two new trails will be constructed; additional educational signs and exhibits will be installed; in winter, a snow coach will be used to improve access to the Exit Glacier area; educational activities will be scheduled at the Nature Center year round; and the bike path will be groomed in the winter for non-motorized recreation.
4. *Manage user conflict* – the Exit Glacier area will be divided into management zones. In winter, motorized use and non-motorized recreation have been separated in areas where user conflict would otherwise occur.

The original preferred alternative (also considered the environmentally preferred alternative), and the other two action alternatives, were not selected for implementation because the NPS needs additional information. Until that information is collected, the NPS has decided not to take the actions related to winter management within most of the study area (other than the Visitor Facilities and Pedestrian zones). Instead, the NPS will collect additional data on types and levels of winter visitor use, winter wildlife habitat utilization, wildlife population and distribution, wildlife responses to disturbance, forage availability, etc. Such data will allow the park to better develop winter management strategies for these areas.

Under ANILCA Section 1110(a), snowmachines may be used in conservation system units for traditional activities. The NPS intends to define the term “traditional activities” before further planning decisions are made for snowmachine use in the area. Until this term is defined, the NPS cannot determine what, if any, activities are traditional within Kenai Fjords National Park.

### **Significance Criteria**

The modified preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. This conclusion is based on the following examination the significance criteria defined in 40 CFR Section 1508.27.

*(1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.*

The modified preferred alternative will have no impacts on geologic resources, cultural resources, night sky, aircraft overflights, subsistence activities, socially or economically disadvantaged populations, threatened or endangered species, or designated wilderness. Impacts to soils, water quality, floodplains, wetlands, air quality, soundscape, vegetation, wildlife, visitor experience, the socioeconomic environment, and safety will range from minor to moderate, short-term to long-term effects (see Attachment A for specifics).

*(2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

Under the modified preferred alternative, increased use of trails, and stream crossings to access trails, will have minor impacts on safety. Safety as related to user conflicts will improve as there will be less mixing of motorized and non-motorized activities in winter.

*(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetland, wild and scenic rives, or ecologically critical areas.*

There are about 450 acres of wetlands in the western portions of the Exit Glacier study area. Additionally, small discrete wetland or bog areas are found throughout the study area. Under the modified preferred alternative, minor impacts to wetlands will occur due to the construction of a bike path adjacent to wetlands by altering natural wetland function in a small area of up to 0.25 acre.

*(4) The degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

Successful implementation of this plan will preserve the special experience at this unique locale while providing additional visitor opportunities and managing user conflict. Scoping conducted for the project indicated less controversy than anticipated initially and, thus, resulted in an EA being prepared rather than an EIS. Public comments on the analysis of impacts in the EA also support the determination that this plan will not have highly controversial effects on the quality of the human environment.

*(5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Implementing the modified preferred alternative will not create effects to the human environment that are highly uncertain or that involve unique or unknown risks.

*(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent of future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The modified preferred alternative does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision about a future consideration.

*(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.*

The modified preferred alternative will not act in conjunction with other actions to produce cumulatively significant impacts.

*(8) Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

An archeological survey of the Resurrection River Valley, including the study area, was conducted in 1983. No cultural sites within the study area were identified, other than the remnants of a trapper's cabin, used as recently as the 1960s. A recent observation indicates that this particular site near the confluence of Exit and Paradise Creeks has been extensively impacted by flood events, and the current integrity of the site is unknown. There would be no effects of the modified preferred alternative on cultural resources.

*(9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

None of the plant or animal species occurring in the Exit Glacier area are federally listed as endangered, threatened, special concern, or candidate species.

*(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The modified preferred alternative does not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

The levels of adverse impacts to park resources anticipated from the modified preferred alternative will not result in an impairment of park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park.

The modified preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990. There will be no restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

The National Park Service has determined that the modified preferred alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement is not needed and will not be prepared for this project.